

COMMENTARY

The shameful neglect of our 'Invisible Jews'

By Howard M. Lenhoff

This has been a great decade for the growing Orange County Jewish community. Jews have been coming out of the closet; even more are moving here drawn by the county's dynamic, thriving economy. New synagogues are sprouting. There is a new Jewish Community Center on a Federation Campus that is rapidly

becoming the hub of Jewish activities.

The community is prosperous and generous. About 10 years ago, Orange County Jews gave \$6 million to establish Heritage Pointe, a deluxe retirement home for the local Jewish aged, and have raised close to a million dollars a year to support it through a highly orchestrated and visible fundraising organization.

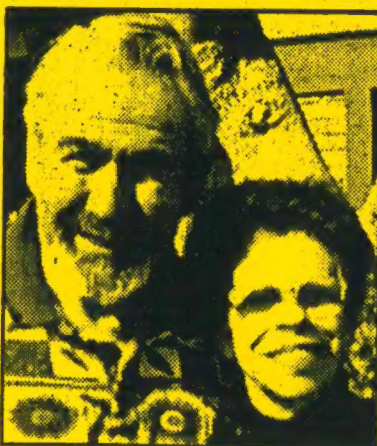
In the past month, one Jewish family gave a \$20 million gift to the University of California at Irvine and another gave \$30 million to UCLA just 50 miles to the north.

But the organized Jewish community, and particularly most of the rabbis in the area, have shirked their responsibilities by not bringing attention and aid to the county's "Invisible Jews," a name given by activist-mother Rose Lacher to the county's retarded Jews.

Just as is the case with any other population, approximately five per cent of Orange County's Jews are retarded. No, Virginia, we are not all Nobel Laureates, big-time movie producers, CEOs of high-tech companies, physicians, professors or philanthropists.

What about these invisible Jews? There is a club, the Jeremiah Society, that meets once a month at the Jewish Community Center for three hours on a usually quiet Sunday afternoon. The club, led by Mrs.

Lacher and her dedicated children consists of about 20 young to middle-aged adults who are developmentally disabled. It is named in honor of Rabbi R. Jeremiah Bergman, the late "dean" of



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Orange County rabbis who singlehandedly tried to make these Jews visible and recognized by Orange County Jewry.

He is gone now. How would he react to the following news about the Jeremiah Society members and their families?

Item: In 1999, three mothers of the group died.

Item: Of the 20 members, nine are without mothers.

Item: Three of the other mothers are dealing with cancer.

Item: All of the parents are aging, with two currently particularly frail.

Item: Two are orphaned and live in the state hospital nearby.

Item: Two, who lived in a respected and supposedly well-run home and care facility, were hospitalized this past year. One was close to death; the other, now

unable to walk, was overdosed with medication prescribed by a county-appointed psychologist and was hospitalized for two months.

Item: Two are blind.

What will happen to these Jews? Most likely they will remain invisible to the Jewish community and end up in some state-supported board and care facility devoid of Jewish content and run by usually low-paid and uneducated caretakers. Fortunately, some of these workers have warm hearts, but there is no guarantee. And the Jewish community will be able to go on honoring its elite without being reminded of its invisible 5 per cent.

Why is it that the organized Jewish community neglects this portion of its people?

The answer is quite complex, yet perhaps it can be summarized in one statement: Organized Jewry has the "Galut Mentality." That is, it has the mentality of Jews living in the Diaspora trying to merge into the non-Jewish world by showing only the one side of our great culture, those Jews who have "made it" in a Gentile world. That may be understandable and in some ways justifiable, but does it excuse neglect of its 5 per cent minority who had the

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THIS YEAR the

Jeremiah House
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Committee to Bring Justice to
the Jewish Retarded

Do you have a retarded Jewish child of any age?
Do you know of any? If you do, please phone
Rose Lacher, President of the Jeremiah Society at:
(714) 997-8193 immediately! Your participation is critical.

'Invisible'

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misfortune of being born retarded?

It is a *shanda*! A shame!

I first encountered this situation most dramatically 30 years ago when we tried to find a weeklong summer camp for our then-teenage retarded daughter, Gloria. At that time we had lived in metropolitan Washington, D.C., and then Miami, Fla. We could not find one! Consequently, we sent Gloria to a number of camps run for the handicapped by churches, often fundamentalist ones. She came home singing "Jesus Loves Me," but who cares? She had a great time.

Today there is a small sprinkling of "points of light" across the country, and they are to be applauded. Some Jewish camps accept mentally handicapped children, some communities have programs and schools for the Jewish retarded, and some even provide residences. That is a tiny start, mostly spearheaded by activist parents.

However, back on the ranch in prosperous Orange County, as in most American Jewish communities, there are *no* Jewish special education classes for the younger children, *no* camping opportunities, *no* recreational opportunities other than the once-a-month Jeremiah

Society, *no* Jewish cared-for residences, and definitely none on the planning boards such as the one provided for aged Jews at Heritage Pointe.

Perhaps, if these retarded Jews reach old age, they will get to live at Heritage Pointe just as do so many older folks who come from out of state to enjoy those facilities. But I doubt it.

Like all parents of a retarded child, we have been concerned about the fate of our child after we die. We have been fortunate to be able to accumulate sufficient resources so that she should be able to live in a first-rate home for the mentally retarded. But in our search for such a Jewish facility, we are finding that none are provided by the powerful Jewish community of the United States.

To think about it, this is not too surprising. Why should organized Jewry in any other part of the United States be any different from organized Jewry in Orange County? Don't they all take their marching orders from the national *machers* of the United Jewish Communities according to

agenda established each year at the highly political General Assembly? Of course they do!

That is no longer my problem, for as I pass age 71 I am making other plans. One is still in the making at the Williams Syndrome Foundation, a secular organization to which I belong. This group plans to open a residential music academy for mentally retarded musicians. In case you do not know, many people with Williams Syndrome are talented. My daughter, who can barely add (but not subtract) simple digits, has perfect pitch, is a lyric soprano and accordionist, has a repertoire of more than 2,000 pieces, sings in 26 languages and, after I prod some rabbis, chants a beautiful Sabbath service.

That music academy, however, will take time to develop, and my wife and I do not foresee having that much time. So this year we are sending Gloria for a trial stay at a 100-acre residential village established and run by the Methodist Church. Her musical outlet will be as a member and soloist of their well-established traveling and performing church choir. Too bad, isn't it, that it can't be a Jewish choir?

It is like *deja vu* all over again. First a search for a Jewish camp for our daughter, and now a search for a safe and productive campus-like village for Jewish adults who are mentally retarded. The Methodists are doing it. The Jews in Israel, despite the hardships of daily living there, provide facilities for their retarded. I have been to two kibbutzim for the adult retarded, and when Gloria gave 13 concerts in Israel in five days a few years ago, we visited many excellent facilities providing one-on-one care. When Gloria went to high school in Haifa during the post-Yom Kippur War months, she had a club (*mo'adon*) to attend after school until the early evening.

U.S. Jewry needs to build villages for the Jewish retarded in several areas of the country so that the residents will be able to attend one someplace reasonably close to

their families. The villages could follow the model of the Methodists or the Israelis or other sponsors of first-rate residential villages here and abroad. No matter how they are built, they should provide a productive Jewish life of dignity.

Maybe this is all wishful thinking as most of the *machers* and Jewish organizational professionals do not identify with the retarded. But they should remember: not only are 5 per cent of American Jews retarded, but they have families, relatives and friends who care. As we tell the numerous Jewish organizational *schnorrers*, we will give to any organization that demonstrates that they are helping the Jewish retarded. So far we can find none.

Gloria is one of the few visible Invisible Jews who has received much attention from such media outlets as "60 Minutes," "Nightline," "Nightline Prime," "Inside Edition" and National Public Radio. She is lucky and her parents will be able to provide for her with the help of the Methodist Church. But what about the other invisible 5 per cent?

That, I am afraid, is your problem and a shame that you will need to learn how to live with.

□ Howard M. Lenhoff is a professor at UC Irvine.



GLORIA LENHOFF

Plight of Retarded Jews in OC

Editor: Dr. Howard Lenhoff's article which appeared in the 1/2/8/00 Heritage is a wake up call to the Jews of southern California, and especially to those of Orange County. He puts into dramatic words the pain of every parent who has a child with developmental disabilities. As an ardent Jew, he and his wife are planning to place his child in a Methodist residential facility because he can find no Jewish facility here in Orange County.

As a parent myself of a mentally handicapped adult daughter, and as part of a group of parents in the Jeremiah society, we know our work is never finished. We must set in place guarantees that our children will be well cared for, live in a clean, attractive and safe environment. That means a dynamic situation where growth and training is continual, where there is an enriching, cultural atmosphere and, if you are Jewish, the Jewish component.

There are generic homes in Orange County, euphemistically called "6-packs," some are decent and good, and there are Catholic and Lutheran homes. There are no Jewish homes. Jewish parents yearn for that assurance that there will be continuity of care, quality supervision and the essence of the Jewish mitzvot, justice.

Without these elements, they fear death because what it will mean for their adult retarded children. But they do die. If there are siblings who are willing and able to take that responsibility, the transition is easier for the individual. There are situations where this does not happen and the stream of supervision is missing. If our special children fall through the bureaucratic cracks (and this happens) it can be catastrophic.



● The Jeremiah Society has taken on the mission to create a Jeremiah House. With the increase in numbers of the Jews living in Orange County, there is a proportional increase in the number of retarded Jews. I am getting an increasing number of calls from southern California Jews in and out of Orange County asking for information and for enrollment in the Jeremiah Society. The need for a Jewish home for the retarded is getting greater.

We are probably too late for Gloria Lenhoff, but we hope that we are not too late for the retarded adults in the Jeremiah Society who are now orphans. We must provide a Jeremiah House for these precious human beings. Not all of them have the talent of Gloria, but they are decent, honest, loving and conscientious people who are an asset to our community, if only we care for them as our own. Will our Jewish community be there for them?

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